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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0418
INFO RUEHZA/WHA CENTRAL AMERICAN COLLECTIVE
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUMIAGH/COMJTF-B SIMS SOTO CANO HO
RHMFIUU/CDR USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL
RHMFIUU/HQ USSOUTHCOM J5 MIAMI FL
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RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHINGTON DC

UNCLAS SAN JOSE 000028

SIPDIS
SENSITIVE

DEPT FOR WHA/CEN AND WHA/PPC, ALSO DEPT FOR USAID/OFDA

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [MASS](#) [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [PHUM](#) [CS](#)

SUBJECT: NOVEMBER'S MASSIVE FLOODING IN LIMON PROVINCE

REF: A. SAN JOSE 0023

[B](#). 08 SAN JOSE 928 (NOTAL)

[C](#). 08 SAN JOSE 800

[D](#). 08 SAN JOSE 197

[1](#). (U) SUMMARY. At the end of Costa Rica's rainy season late last November, a stationary storm caused massive flooding in Limon province. The Ambassador authorized his \$50,000 disaster assistance authority (Ref B) and Joint Task Force Bravo (JTF-B) helicopter assets were deployed to assist both Costa Rica and Panama. JTF-B medevac'd 17 victims from, and delivered over 294,000 pounds of supplies to communities on both sides of the border. The U.S. Navy also participated, with the helicopter from the USS Roberts conducting damage assessment flights. In Costa Rica alone, nearly 56,000 people in 57 communities across three provinces were affected, with a number of roads and bridges washed out. This JTF-B deployment, only one month prior to the January 2009 earthquake relief effort, continued a busy year of JTF-B deployments to Costa Rica. END SUMMARY.

IN LIMON PROVINCE OVER THANKSGIVING, IT WAS FLOODS . . .

[2](#). (U) JTF-Bravo's return to Costa Rica in January for earthquake assistance (Ref A) followed up their important and successful deployment to provide flood relief in the Caribbean border area with Panama in late November. Following the GOCR's disaster declaration on November 26, the Ambassador followed suit (Ref B) authorizing \$50,000 to be used to cover local transportation costs and to provide relief supplies. On November 28, a USAID-chartered flight delivered over 34 tons of equipment including chain saws, blankets, plastic sheeting, cans for water and hygiene kits, and JTF-B helicopters arrived and set up regional operations for Costa Rica and Panama from the Limon airport. Working closely with local counterparts, Embassy personnel (U.S. and LES) helped staff the make-shift operations center established there, and deployed to the two remote landing zones in the area.

[3](#). (U) Over a week-long operation, and despite the continued heavy rain and low clouds, the 68 personnel and seven helicopters deployed from Honduras supported or flew 92 missions (49 in Costa Rica and 43 in Panama) totaling over 150 hours of flight time. They medevac'd 17 victims from, and delivered over 294,000 pounds of supplies to, communities on both sides of the border. The U.S. Navy was also involved, diverting the frigate USS Roberts so its helicopter could conduct damage assessment flights on November 27. In

Costa Rica alone, nearly 56,000 people in 57 communities across three provinces were affected, with a number of roads and bridges washed out. Damage to the regional banana crop alone was estimated at over USD 20 million. The total value of USG civilian and military assistance exceeded USD 1.5 million.

¶4. (U) All major media covered the arrival of the JTF-B Blackhawk helicopters along with the subsequent delivery of humanitarian aid. Television coverage highlighted USG assistance to those in need, showing cargo being unloaded and featured Vice Minister of Public Security Jose Torres thanking the American people and the USG for their assistance.

. . . . BUT OFFICIAL THANKS WAS SLOW IN COMING

¶5. (U) The residents of the Limon area enthusiastically welcomed JTF-B, even asking to have their pictures taken with uniformed U.S. military personnel, who were "more important than President (Arias)" at that moment, according to one local. When not conducting relief efforts, JTF-B and Embassy Office of Defense Representative (ODR) personnel visited with local school children, whose school had loaned a blackboard to equip the rudimentary Limon airport "ops center." Media coverage of USG efforts was extensive and positive.

¶6. (SBU) Official recognition of the USG efforts in Limon was slower in coming, however. On December 3, the MFA issued a release thanking France for its 50,000 Euro emergency assistance, and the Rio Group for its expressions of solidarity; JTF-Bravo's efforts were not even mentioned. After some quiet behind-the-scenes diplomacy on our part, the MFA issued a "thank you" release on December 4, and the director of the FEMA-equivalent National Emergency Commission (CNE) wrote to thank the Ambassador for our assistance. Minister of the Presidency Arias also personally thanked JTF-B commander Col. Richard Juergens and DCM Brennan in a hastily-arranged meeting in San Jose the same day.

¶7. (SBU) President Arias, who had missed the flood crisis entirely, returned from a visit to Europe and Singapore to see the disaster area for himself on December 16. He invited the media, GOCR officials, legislators from the region, and a number of local COMs (including Ambassador Cianchette) to accompany him. The president seemed completely unaware of the scope of USG assistance, and lobbied the other ambassadors for reconstruction help. However, Minister Del Vecchio and PLN legislator Yalile Esna (who represents Limon) were generous in their praise. Interestingly, the VIP delegation briefly (and very easily) crossed into Panama near Sixaloe, highlighting the extremely porous border in that region.

OVERALL, IT WAS A BUSY YEAR

¶8. (U) In addition to the support to the earthquake effort and the Limon flooding, the last year has proven to be very busy and successful for JTF-B (and related U.S. Mission objectives) in Costa Rica. In September, a Medical Readiness Training Exercise (MEDRETE) treated nearly 1000 patients in isolated indigenous communities in the Burica region, on the Pacific coast border with Panama (Ref C; see also December edition of State magazine.) In May, two Blackhawks lifted over 180,000 pounds of materials used to rebuild suspension foot bridges in the rugged Talamanca area of Limon province (Ref D). These were completed later in the year, with local officials stressing that safe access to schools and health facilities would have been impossible without the new structures.

COMMENT

19. (SBU) The November 2008 floods, along with the more recent January 8 earthquake, highlight the USG's commitment to disaster assistance in Costa Rica and the region. We have not provided this much assistance to Costa Rica since Hurricane Mitch in 2000. While the GOCR has sometimes been slow in recognizing our support (or needlessly critical of the amount, as in the case of our earthquake help), the people of Costa Rica are genuinely grateful for our efforts. The outstanding response by JTF-B, once again, demonstrates the value of U.S. military "soft power" in the region.
CIANCHETTE